paper power

SO LOW-TECH — AND SO ENTRENCHED

In 1900, at the dawn of the new century, a tiny but important invention was registered at the U.S. Patent Office: the paper clip. If you think about it, this little device is intimately related to what is probably the predominant information technology of the 20th century. Paper.

How can it be, with all the trillions of dollars spent on silicon-based brains and other technologies, that so much of the world's information remains bound to sheets of bleached, dried wood pulp, held together by tiny bits of wire?

YESTERDAY

When computers first entered the world of business, pundits and futurists immediately proclaimed that the end of paper was near. The most eager predictions involved the typical letter-length sheet of paper. It was destined for the dustbin of history, noted *Business Week* in a 1975 article about "the office of the future." It promised that forthcoming word processing equipment was "the start of the paperless office."

The concept of the paperless society was born, and we eagerly awaited an end to the flood of paper that seemed to be enveloping us.

TODAY

We're still waiting and, if we look around, we realize that we are drowning in paper. Since 1982, production of office paper has grown by 60 per cent. North American businesses generate some 1 trillion new pieces of paper every year. It is difficult to put such numbers into perspective, other than to say that you could build a wall three and a half metres high, stretching from New York City to Los Angeles, just with the paper that we throw out every year. We use almost a kilogram of paper per person per day, if you factor in not just office paper, but newsprint, paper packaging and other forms of the material.

The cost to deal with all this paper is astronomical. Studies suggest that filling a four-drawer filing cabinet costs about $25,000, when you include the cost of our time in generating, processing and dealing with the stuff. It costs another $2,100 per year to maintain it, given that it takes some 10 minutes to retrieve and re-file each piece of paper when needed. Not to mention the additional costs for the three per cent of documents that are misfiled, which can only be retrieved at a further cost of about $120 per document!

We can hold technology such as photocopiers, laser printers, fax machines, computers and other devices to be directly responsible. One consulting firm reported in yet another study that the typical office worker visits a fax machine, printer or copier some 61 times a week. According to Hewlett Packard, the introduction of e-mail, which was supposed to reduce the exchange of paper-based inter-office memos, resulted in a 40 per cent increase in printing volumes!

Further, the vast sums of money invested in office technology — far from stemming the tide — have fed it. Photocopiers? Today's models can churn out more than 100 copies a minute, compared to 7.5 pages back in 1959. Fax machines? Conceptually a photocopier plugged into a telephone, the device has been adopted with a vengeance. North Americans sent some 65 billion faxes in North America in 1997 alone.

TOMORROW

Is the concept of the paperless office but a pipe dream?

A new CAP Ventures study examining this question indicates that paper consumption in the U.S. will grow from 43.7 to 65.6 million tons between 1995 and 2015. Ironically, while you can buy the report on-line (for U.S.$9,495), you must then wait for the company to ship it to you — all 350 pages of it. Is there something instructive in the fact that a report called *The Future of Paper* is available only on paper?

Wernher von Braun once commented, "We can lick gravity, but sometimes the paperwork is overwhelming." No doubt that is true; we can't make this stuff go away, no matter how hard we try. Noted

one fellow who works for a company in the paper industry: "People are in love with paper. They want to feel it in their hands."

It's the ultimate information relationship, most likely because it remains the simplest technology in our daily lives. As one wag put it, "You don't have to turn paper on and wait for it to boot." Paper doesn't crash, bombard you with nasty error messages when you try to use it or suffer from compatibility problems.

There are, of course, brave souls who continue to attempt to rid the world of paper in the workplace, their efforts aided by studies that show significant cost savings from the exchange of "electronic documents." As a result, it should come as no surprise that the electronic document industry will grow to $152.3 billion annually from today's $97.5 billion. But you won't hear too many within this industry talk of the "paperless office," since even they know that the total elimination of paper is indeed but a pipe dream.

There is no doubt that as our electronic world continues to unfold, the world of business will find ways to eliminate more and more paper. Yet will it ever truly disappear? Likely not. The real question is, can we actually change habits and relationships that have accumulated over the centuries? The answer is no. Instead, we will find that paper and electronic information will come to co-exist in an uneasy yet stable truce, both of them competing for our attention and time.

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